

An extract from *The Night They Blitzed The Ritz* by John Bull



On my fifth birthday, in June 1940, I was given a pair of toy binoculars which immediately became my most treasured possession. I used to stand on the garden wall, steadying myself against the clothes post (which carried the washing line) and sweep the skies looking for aeroplanes, hoping to see a Spitfire and a Messerschmidt shooting it out over our heads in what we called a dogfight.

By some miracle the binoculars were still unbroken on a day in the August holidays that Grandpa took me for our usual walk down to the gardens by the ferry, across the harbour from Portsmouth, a favourite place for him to pick up his bets on racing days. He met a lot of people he knew and stopped to chat.

"Lovely day, Mr Ferré," most of them said. It was, too, with clear blue skies and a few puffs of cloud moving slowly in a light breeze. Good flying weather perhaps. Ever since June, when France had 'packed it in' as Gosport people termed it, everybody in England seemed to be expecting the German army to land in force along the south coast. Even when it wasn't mentioned out loud it was on everyone's mind.

We must have got to the gardens at about 10 o'clock and, lovely day or not, suddenly we were in the middle of our first air-raid. I remember Grandpa telling people afterwards that the Bofors anti-aircraft gun near the ferry started firing some time before the siren sounded.

The first unbelievably loud bang from that gun hammered our ears like a blacksmith bashing an anvil. Everyone stood paralysed by shock.

Then suddenly people were running for the air-raid shelter, and a crowd of them were helping Grandpa and me along, shouting at each other to hurry up and get under cover. This wasn't a practice. This was real. The war had come to Gosport.

The Bofors gun in its sandbagged pit in the ferry gardens banged away at the sky, as did every gun on every ship in the harbour. The noise itself was petrifying. I saw black puffs of smoke appear high in the air and, despite being scared by the noise, I wanted to take a closer look through my binoculars.

"There's no time for that. Got to get into the shelter," Grandpa shouted. A young man lifted me up and started running with me held tightly to him. Over his shoulder I could see the barrage balloons hoisted over the ships and, just as we reached the shelter, a black plane sweeping above the buildings on the Portsmouth side.

Someone yelled out: 'Look, look...it's Jerry' and we all stopped to watch. The aircraft raced along with tiny puffs of smoke appearing all round it. There was a sudden burst of flame in the sky and the remains of a blazing barrage balloon drifted down, as the black plane headed out over the sea towards the Isle of Wight.

The crowd came to its senses and piled into the shelter. They were all talking at once, yelling at each other over the ear-splitting, heart-stopping hammer blows of the guns. Scared, but also excited. A couple of young men stationed themselves by the door of the shelter and every now and again stepped out for a quick look -- ignoring the women in the shelter who kept shouting: "Don't be a fool. Get back inside!"

The men kept up a commentary that was repeated from mouth to mouth down the shelter.

"There's another plane"--"Another plane." "Think they've dropped a bomb"--"Dropped a bomb."

One of the men shouted: "There's a plane been hit. Smoke's pouring from the engine. I can see a parachute coming down. Must be the pilot. Be lucky to get down through all this gunfire."

"Probably drop in the water and drown," a woman suggested.

"Is it the invasion, do you think?" people were asking each other.

"I can't hear the church bells," said one of the older men. "They'd ring the bells if it was the invasion."

A woman said: "Be typical of Jerry to sneak up without warning." And everyone laughed, as if it the Germans were obliged to make sure someone rang the churchbells before they started marching up the beach.

I have no idea how long it lasted; I don't suppose any of us could have been certain.

When the all-clear siren wailed out its long, drawn-out note we went, thankfully, outside. People seemed reluctant to go home and hung around talking about the raid. This was something new all right. Gosport would have to start coming to terms with this. So this was war. On the doorstep, or more accurately, bang overhead.

Even Grandpa, usually a shy man, had plenty to say; until he realised the rest of the family would be worried about us.

A kindly taxi driver offered us a free ride home. As we drove up Queen's Road the driver suddenly said: "Hello, something's up." People were standing about in groups at their front gates.

Grandpa thanked the driver and hurried me up the path. He raised the knocker on his front door at 123 Queen's Road -- and the door collapsed inwards. Inside, the house was a wreck, rubble and broken glass everywhere. We finally noticed there was no glass in any of the windows. Shreds of lace curtains hung about the shattered Venetian blinds that Grannie was so proud of.

The neighbours gathered round.

"Where are they?" Grandpa shouted.

"They're all right, don't worry," they said, and led us to the pub on the corner, the Queen's Hotel. My mother ran out to meet us and scooped me up in her arms.

"Thank God he's safe," said Grannie, kissing the top of my head. She sat down, nursing a glass of stout and I saw her face and clothes were covered in dust.

"We were buried alive, Alf," she told my grandfather, a sob in her voice. "The ARP and the neighbours have only just dug us out." Grandpa hugged her to him.

My uncle Alf handed his father a welcome glass of whisky.

"House a few doors down took a direct hit," he said. "Dunno if anyone was in there. In the blast a ton of rubble fell on our shelter. We were all in there."

"Then where's Bill?" Grandpa asked, looking round for his younger son.

"I'm here, Dad," he called, hurrying over. "I had to go and have my head stitched at the ARP post. They got their hands full with all the casualties..."

Alfie Waterloo, the landlord of the Queen's, handed him a pint of ale. We watched him take a deep pull.

"Look," Uncle Bill said pointing to his forehead, "look at this cut. I'm going to have a scar shaped just like a swastika!"

Alfie's wife Maude went over to examine his cut; after all it was the street's first war wound. "Well, Bill," she announced in the way that landladies have, "you've got the mark of Adolf, all right. Let's hope it's a good luck charm."

Everyone laughed. War had come to Gosport suddenly. Many people had been injured, some had been killed. My grandparents and uncles were homeless. And yet they could laugh?

Grannie, perhaps remembering World War I, was the first to take it in.

"Seems like there's not going to be any civilians in this war," she said. She sipped her glass of stout, crossed herself and added: "God help us all."

This is an extract from *The Night They Blitzed The Ritz* by John Bull

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